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ABSTRACT

In the early childhood field, the word "transition" is used to describe the period of time that falls between two different types of activities, as well as the time periods in which children move from home to school, from school to after-school activities, from one activity to another within a preschool, or from preschool to kindergarten. Recently, there has been growing consensus that the key to effective services for young children is less through bridging the gap between different types of programs and more through ensuring continuity in certain key elements that characterize all good early childhood education. These key elements are: (1) developmentally appropriate practice that responds to the natural curiosity of young children, reaffirms a sense of self, promotes positive dispositions toward learning, and helps build increasingly complex skills in the use of language, problem solving, and cooperation; (2) involvement of parents with the schools as decision makers, volunteers, and staff, and ongoing communication between parents and teachers; and (3) health care, child care, and other supportive services for children and their families. These elements, which often characterize preschool programs, should continue into the early years of elementary school. This continuity, in and out of the classroom, will ensure continuous and effective services throughout the early years. Eleven references are cited. (AC)

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Beyond Transition: Ensuring Continuity in Early Childhood Services

Joan Lombardi

In the early childhood field, the word *transition* is used in many different ways. Traditionally, *transition* has been used to describe the period of time that falls between two different types of activities. *Transition* may also be used to describe the time period in which children move from home to school, from school to after-school activities, from one activity to another within a preschool, or from preschool to kindergarten. In each case, early childhood professionals have been concerned with easing the transition between two different types of activities or environments.

Continuity: A Concept Revisited

With more and more children participating in early childhood programs before they enter school, there is an increasing focus on the transition that occurs when children move from preschool to kindergarten. Many children have problems adjusting to elementary school programs that have a different philosophy, teaching style, and structure than those programs in which they participated during their earlier years. Transition efforts were designed to help ease the entry into school by preparing both children and families for the differences children will encounter.

But more recently, there has been a growing consensus that the key to effective services for young children is less through bridging the gap between different types of programs, and more through ensuring continuity in certain key elements that characterize all good early childhood programs. This notion of continuity is not new. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, efforts such as Project Developmental Continuity and Follow-Through were designed to ensure that the principles of good early childhood programs continued into the early years of elementary school. But today's concept of continuity has changed in several respects. First, there is now much more consensus in the field regarding what constitutes appropriate practice in all types of early childhood programs from infancy through the primary grades. There is also growing recognition that parent involvement is a key to a child's success and should be encouraged as children move on to elementary school. Finally, the need for supportive services for both children and families has intensified. Comprehensive family support and health services are critical components throughout the early years.

Towards Continuity: Three Key Elements

If programs are to provide effective early childhood services throughout children's early years, they must share at least three characteristics: developmentally appropriate practice, parent involvement, and supportive services for children and families.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Continuity across early childhood services is facilitated by the degree to which all programs are developmentally appropriate. Naturally, the setting, age range, and abilities of the children will differ across programs. As children progress from preschool to kindergarten and on to the primary grades, they show increased motor and language skills, they can pay attention longer, they can play more cooperatively, and they are more able to develop interests that go beyond their immediate surroundings. Throughout the preschool and early elementary years, children learn best through active exploration of their environment and through interactions with adults, other children, and concrete materials that build on earlier experiences.

Programs for young children should not be seen as either play-oriented or academic. Rather, developmentally appropriate practice, whether in a preschool or a primary classroom, should respond to the natural curiosity of young children, reaffirm a sense of self, promote positive dispositions towards learning, and help build increasingly complex skills in the use of language, problem solving, and cooperation.

Parent Involvement. One hallmark of any successful early childhood program is the degree to which it involves parents. Such involvement should not stop when children reach the schoolhouse door. Good schools for young children welcome family members in ways that go well beyond traditional parent activities such as fundraising and annual parent-teacher conferences. Ongoing com-

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munication between parents and teachers has become increasingly important. Parents can be involved as decision makers, volunteers, and staff. They can participate in parent education and support groups, be encouraged to observe the classroom, and, in general, take a more active role in their child's education both at school and at home.

Schools also need to respond to the diversity among families. Parent activities need to be responsive to the language and culture of the family and be tailored to meet specific needs of teen parents, single parents, working parents, blended families, and families with special service needs. Given the increasing number of working parents with young children, employers can be supportive of parent involvement by providing release time for parent participation and by initiating policies that support work and family life.

Supportive services. Effective early childhood programs, particularly those for low-income families, need to respond to the comprehensive needs of children and families for health care, child care, and other family supports. Traditionally, schools have not played a role in ensuring that such services are provided. Yet there is a growing recognition that schools are the natural hub for child and family services. New relationships between school and other health and human service providers are emerging as comprehensive services are integrated into public education.

Supportive services that include school and parent representation promote collaborative processes and community development. The uniting of school and community resources and concerns, and the clear recognition of the fact that the school is embedded in its community, sustain healthy environments and contribute greatly to continuity for children and families.

Conclusion

Traditional notions of transition, which focus on bridging the gaps between different types of early childhood programs, are changing. Because we now know that young children learn in similar ways throughout the early years, all programs in the community should adhere to developmentally appropriate principles from infancy through the primary grades. In addition, parent involvement, family support, and linkages to health services, which often characterize preschool programs, should continue into the early years of elementary school. It is through the continuity of such services, in and out of the classroom, that we will eventually move beyond a concern for transition and ensure continuous and effective services throughout the early years.

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